

Critical Areas and Agriculture

Farms are a valued part of Whidbey and Camano Island's rural character, with a number of historic farms stretching back generations. Historically, farmlands were established within existing wetlands, and relied on natural waterways for irrigation and drainage. The Growth Management Act (GMA) (RCW 36.70A) requires that jurisdictions adopt regulations to assure the conservation of both agricultural lands as well as critical areas. Island County seeks to balance these two requirements, modifying standard critical areas regulations for existing and ongoing agriculture, provided farm operators act as good stewards.

When exempt status applies to farming:

Certain existing and ongoing agricultural activities are exempt from critical areas regulations under Island County Code (ICC) 17.02.040.E.1 and 17.02B.300.A, if they are conducted with agricultural best management practices (BMPs), outlined in [Ordinance C-86-17](#).



Science supporting best management:

Best management practices (BMPs) focus on preventing or reducing potential adverse impacts to critical areas and farmed wet meadows. Agricultural BMPs are based on conservation practice standards drawn from several sources, the most significant of which is the [Natural Resource Conservation Service \(NRCS\)](#). Agricultural BMPs address:

- Controlling pollutants
- Limiting sediment loss
- Nutrient management
- Reducing pesticide contamination

Agricultural Activities, Existing and On-Going:

Existing and on-going agriculture is defined as activities conducted on lands defined in RCW 84.34.020(2), and those activities involved in the production of crops or livestock. These activities include:

- Operation and maintenance of farm and stock ponds or drainage ditches and irrigation systems.
- Activities which bring an area into agricultural use are not part of an on-going operation.

- Normal maintenance, repair, or operation of legally existing serviceable structures, facilities, or improved areas.
- Changes between agricultural activities.

An operation ceases to be on-going when the area on which it is conducted is converted to a nonagricultural use or has lain idle for more than five (5) years, unless the idle land is registered in a federal or state soils conservation program.

Resources:

Please contact the Island County [Critical Areas Planner](#) with specific questions about farming and critical areas regulatory requirements. See additional resources below:

- Best Management Practices: [Ordinance C-86-17](#)
- Critical Areas Exempt Activities: [17.02B.300](#)
- The Watershed Company, [Review of Agricultural Exemption for Island County](#)
- [Natural Resource Conservation Service \(NRCS\)](#)
- [Washington State University Extension Island County](#)

